

Review: Opera Briefs (Tapestry)

Mooney on theatre

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“[Tapestry Briefs](#)“, Tapestry’s annual program of operatic shorts, was a wonderful showcase of young, contemporary, operatic talent. The program presents the collaborations from Tapestry’s 17th annual Composer-Librettist Laboratory. This year’s lab was comprised of four librettists (Nicholas Billon, Morris Panych, Julie Tepperman, David Yee) and four composers (Patrick Arteaga, Cecilia Livingston, Jocelyn Morlock, Chris Thornborrow). Each short scene was created by a different librettist/composer pairing. The twelve shorts were extremely diverse and spanned a wide range of human emotions and experience.

Many people with whom I discuss my love of opera express surprise that new opera exists. When most people think about opera they think of two-hundred year old music, convoluted plots containing archaic social references, and jokes that are either flat or offensive in the modern day. This production demonstrates the power that new opera has to change such preconceived notions about the genre. The issues were timely, the humour current and the situations easy to understand and contextualize.

The four singers (Carla Huhtanen, Soprano; Krisztina Szabo, Mezzo Soprano; Keith Klassen, Tenor; and Peter McGillivray, Baritone) demonstrated exceptional vocal, dramatic and comedic prowess. Each performer did a fine job of changing the tone of their performance as they transitioned through each scene.

Highlights of the program included “Cindy + Mindy = BFFS4VR”, an IM chat between teenage besties that goes terribly and side-splittingly awry. The darkly funny and very socially current piece “Oh Baby, Baby” bared the soul of a woman becoming unstrung as those around her celebrate baby joy. “Dead Kings” was a somber and intense contrast to some of the lighter fare on the program, tackling issues of genocide, identity, allegiance and politics in a way that was captivating and thought provoking.

While the orchestration consisted solely of piano, this instrument was used to its full advantage. Musical Directors Gregory Oh and Jennifer Tung are clearly masters at eliciting a broad range of colours and tones from the instrument. At one point a mason jar with spoons was placed inside the grand piano to produce a rumbling effect that bore little resemblance to a usual piano sound. Most of the arrangements were fairly stark and overall pleasing to the ear. While new music must inevitably challenge traditional understandings of tonality, I never felt as though musicality was being sacrificed for experimentation.

While most of the scenes took place in the main space at Ernest Balmer Studio, some scenes required a more intimate setting. Each audience member was given a blue or orange card and each group was ushered into a different area of the studio for some scenes. “Switched at Birth” for example took place in the area in front of a freight elevator. The piece was accompanied by an upright piano which was placed inside the elevator.

This was a fantastic showcase of rising talent in the Canadian opera scene. Even if one piece is not to your liking, there is enough variety that there was something for everyone. This show has appeal for seasoned opera goers and new music novices alike.